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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 HONG KONG 002208

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TAGS: [AMED](#) [EAGR](#) [PGOV](#) [SOCI](#) [TBIO](#) [CH](#) [HK](#)  
SUBJECT: HK HEALTH SECRETARY ON AVIAN INFLUENZA, MELAMINE,  
AND HEALTH CARE REFORM

REF: HONG KONG 1034

Classified By: CONSUL GENERAL JOE DONOVAN. Reasons: 1.4 (B,D)

11. (SBU) Summary: Secretary for Food, Health and Welfare York Chow discussed with the Consul General Hong Kong Government (HKG) eQrts to detect and prevent an outbreak of Avian Influenza (AI); melamine contamination and health care reform are also at the top of the Health Bureau agenda, Chow said, during the December 4 introductory call. As the flu season approaches, health authorities are aggressively testing birds and their droppings for the H5N1 Avian Influenza virus; 18-25 birds typically test positive each year. Plans are on track for a centralized poultry slaughtering system and total ban on the public sale and handling of live chickens by 2011. Despite political difficulties, Chow is committed to health care reforms, including a city-wide electronic health record data base, better public/private integration and cost sharing. End Summary.

AI and Melamine -- Preparation and Reaction Are Key  
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12. (SBU) Chow agreed the risk of a wide-spread human outbreak of Avian Influenza is serious and stated that the HKG is committed to an early detection and reaction strategy to control such an outbreak. The Center for Health Protection (CHP) has steadily increased capabilities since 2004 and is aggressively monitoring for the virus. Between 50 and 100 tests are conducted daily on birds and their droppings; between 18-25 birds are found with the H5N1 virus each year. Chow cited the HKG reaction to the June discovery of the virus in chicken droppings in local markets as an example of the system's effectiveness. Shortly after the discovery, authorities banned the keeping of live poultry in the market overnight and put in place incentives to reduce live chicken sales in Hong Kong (Reftel). The number of live chicken vendors in the city has since shrunk from 470 to 131. Plans to ban the private handling of live chickens and implement a central slaughtering system are accelerating and should be in place by 2011, he said.

13. (C) Responding to a question on Hong Kong's response to melamine contamination, Chow noted that after the 2007 discovery of melamine in imported pet food in the United States, Hong Kong health authorities purchased equipment and designed protocols to do their own melamine testing. Although not actively testing when melamine was discovered in Mainland infant formula, this preparation allowed the HKG to react immediately, discovering the contamination was widespread and reporting this to Mainland authorities. Chow

assured the CG the HKG would continue to aggressively monitor and test for melamine as well as fully coordinate with the United States on other food safety issues.

Health Care Reform -- Bigger Private Role Coming, Who Pays?

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¶4. (C) Chow believes promised health care reforms will be politically difficult but are absolutely necessary due to expected dramatic rises in demand and cost as Hong Kong's population ages. Noting that 50% of Hong Kong's doctors treat 90% of the patients, Chow stated that better integration of public/private sector services will be a major focus of the reforms. Other reforms will include discouraging Hong Kong residents from seeking routine medical services through hospital emergency rooms and encouraging preventative health care through private practice family doctors -- perhaps funded by a voucher system. Chow also noted the lack of regulation and transparency of private health care pricing as significant problems that must be addressed.

¶5. (C) Other reforms will include the introduction of an integrated electronic health care database containing individual records for the majority of Hong Kong residents. A pilot program being evaluated in several hospitals will be extended to include 200 government clinics. Chow noted that privacy and information protection concerns need to be fully addressed, but he hopes that within four to five years the database will be fully operational and can be extended to private hospitals and clinics. The Health Bureau is still analyzing public feed-back from six health care reform proposals that would shift some health care costs to

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individuals. The consultative period for these proposals ended in June 2008. The results, and debate over who will pay the cost, will shape the government's public health care agenda in the coming year.  
DONOVAN